



# Striking *the* Balance

*Maintaining Service and Accountability Report*

*1998-99  
Third Edition*



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Food and  
Nutrition  
Service

Office of the  
Administrator

Telephone:  
(703) 305-2062

Fax:  
(703) 305-2908

3101 Park  
Center Drive  
Room 803

Alexandria, VA  
22302-1500

May 1999

Greetings:

I am pleased to open this first edition of *Striking the Balance—Maintaining Service and Accountability*. In previous releases, this publication was entitled *Managing for the Public Trust*. The name change does not minimize our obligation or desire to ensure public confidence in the Food Stamp Program (FSP). It simply better communicates the importance of ensuring that FSP is accessible to all eligible households and that only eligible households receive benefits. These two efforts readily translate into an efficient, well-managed program—promoting public confidence.

As Administrator of the Food and Nutrition Service, I head the Federal agency that leads the effort to reduce hunger and food insecurity for needy Americans. Whether you are a participating State partner, an advocacy support group, a concerned citizen, or a direct recipient of this effort, I invite you to join me in this mission.

Balancing program accessibility and benefit accuracy is a labor intensive task that requires the commitment and effort of many hands. I was formerly an eligibility worker and Director of the Wayne County Department of Social Services in Detroit, Michigan, so I have experienced firsthand the complexities that hamper efficiencies in service and accountability.

While program access and service are of paramount importance, this publication is focused on the significant issue of payment accuracy. I have personally spoken on numerous occasions about the crucial need to reduce the amount of benefits issued in error, and I am well aware that many States have initiatives under way to combat the increasing error rate. Some States are further along on this front than others, but all are aware of this call and are beginning to move in the right direction. It is encouraging that some States have been successful in reducing overpayments to the extent that they have qualified for enhanced funding. However, we have much to do to balance the need to provide quality services to our recipients while increasing payment accuracy.

I firmly believe that together we can strike the balance.



Sincerely,

Samuel Chambers, Jr.  
Administrator



---

# State of Louisiana

## Department of Social Services

---

Dear Food Stamp Program Manager:

I appreciate the honor of being invited to discuss with you the issue of payment accuracy in the Food Stamp Program and to share with you the ideas and strategies that have resulted in some success in this area for the Louisiana Department of Social Services.

---


*Underlying all these measures was the unwavering commitment of executive management to improve payment accuracy in the Food Stamp Program, the largest assistance program administered by the Department.*

*Commitment at the top is useless unless it can be transferred to every staff level involved in this complex process.*

---

We have not always enjoyed such success. As with most success stories, we first faced adversity. By 1992, we were faced with sanctions of \$14.5 million for excessive error rates occurring from 1986-91, with a high of 11.7 percent in Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 1990. The State's economy was in a downward spiral, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamp caseloads were increasing faster than in most other States. The caseworkers were overwhelmed, and both quality and quantity of services to our recipients were suffering.

We decided that this situation was intolerable and embarked on a mission to change the way we administered the Food Stamp Program for our most vulnerable citizens on behalf of the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). We did many of the things that have since become standard in the area of improving payment accuracy: internal reorganization, automating our policy issuance system, implementing 3-month certifications for cases with fluctuating earned income (coupled with a rigorous workload reduction plan to assist our workers in dealing with the resultant increased workload), establishing corrective action committees locally and at the State level, and many additional exemplary practices that we "borrowed" from other States that were unfailingly generous in sharing their successes with us.



---


Underlying all these measures was the unwavering commitment of executive management to improve payment accuracy in the Food Stamp Program, the largest assistance program administered by the Department. Commitment at the top is useless unless it can be transferred to every staff level involved in this complex process. Every staff member from the Secretary to the beginning eligibility examiner must assume ownership of his/her part of the process. One of the greatest challenges we faced was to “sell” the idea to every employee that we can do this job much better than we ever did it in the past. We began with State-level staff, and the process culminated in the first of our meetings with all of our eligibility supervisors in 1991. These 250 individuals were the key to success, as they directly supervised every eligibility examiner in the State—where payment accuracy happens or it doesn’t. This was not the most pleasant of gatherings as we challenged these individuals to do much more work, do it far better, and not to expect any additional staff with which to accomplish the objective. Amazingly, they did it! Not only did our staff rise to the challenge, they surpassed our fondest hopes, and we received enhanced funding from FNS for FFY 1994 and then again in FFY 1997.

During this process, continued commitment to this goal was extraordinarily difficult. Through periods of reduction in force, implementation of a new automated eligibility system and, most recently, implementation of welfare reform, it would have been far easier to back off and accept only avoidance of the sanction mode. This is unacceptable, as I feel that we can render no better service to our customers than to provide courteous, timely, and accurate determinations of eligibility and benefit level to every applicant who needs help.

This is the thought I offer to you, that you make exceptional payment accuracy your personal goal and that as you seek to share this goal with all with whom you work that you remain committed to it during all the trials and tribulations that you will surely face.

Sincerely,

Madlyn B. Bagneris  
Secretary



---

# State of Minnesota

## Department of Human Services

---

Dear Fellow Food Stamp Program Administrators:

Minnesota is committed to payment accuracy in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) now and into the next century. In Minnesota, we believe that accuracy is critical to public confidence. This is especially critical for public support of a program that is a safety net for many and also helps bridge the gap in emergency situations. Minnesota has experience with both. In Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 1997, Minnesota issued \$195 million in food stamp benefits to people in need. In the past 2 years, we also issued emergency food stamps for victims of devastating floods and tornadoes.


---

*Minnesota is committed to payment accuracy in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) now and into the next century.*

---

Minnesota is proud to have the lowest food stamp error rate in the midwest region. For FFY 1997, our food stamp error rate was 6.95 percent. Since 1992, our food stamp error rate declined from a high of 10.5 percent. Much of the credit for this tremendous level of improvement goes to county managers, county supervisors, county financial workers, and the Minnesota Department of Human Services staff who are skilled in food stamp policy and systems and in working with the people we serve.

Training, automation, and program simplification have helped us improve our food stamp accuracy rate. Minnesota has extensive cash and FSP policy and computerized systems training that allow workers to develop and grow their skills. We have an automated eligibility system, MAXIS, that truly supports financial workers through its extensive eligibility and payment functions and on-line policy manual. Our administration of FSP for families has been simplified by combining it with the Minnesota Family Investment Program, our welfare reform effort. Therefore, financial workers and the families they serve have only one set of rules to follow. We believe this greatly assists in our payment accuracy efforts.



---

Minnesota is working hard to get our payment error rate below 5.9 percent. We want very much to qualify for enhanced funding. That goal is on the horizon for us as we continue to strive for better and more effective ways to enhance program accuracy. At the same time, we continue to serve the people of Minnesota to the best of our abilities and to assist them toward self-sufficiency.

With these goals in mind, Minnesota actively supports and is committed to payment accuracy in FSP. We look forward to working with other States and Food and Nutrition Service on ideas to enhance FSP accuracy and administration.

Sincerely,

David S. Doth  
Commissioner

---

# State of Mississippi

## Department of Human Services

---

Dear Fellow Food Stamp Program Administrators:

We are pleased to report progress by the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) in improving payment accuracy in the State's Food Stamp Program. After several years of 10 percent error rates (1991-96), we reduced our errors to 6.99 percent in Federal

Fiscal Year (FFY) 1997. We are on target for an even better percentage for FFY 1998. MDHS' leadership at every level recognizes that payment accuracy is one of the agency's top priorities and that increased accountability and awareness have resulted in a more efficient program for both the recipient and the taxpayer.

We have devoted significant time, resources, and training dollars toward this effort. The establishment of a Quality Enhancement Unit within our Division of Economic Assistance is just one example of specifically targeting program improvement. Other initiatives include a statewide "We're On A Mission" payment accuracy campaign, along with payment accuracy seminars for all eligible staff in our 23 Six-Million-Dollar Club counties.

While pleased with our progress, we continue to stress the importance of further improvement. We remain committed

to operating a food stamp program in a manner that is second to none in providing timely and accurate benefits to Mississippi's neediest citizens.

Sincerely,

Donald R. Taylor  
Executive Director

---

*MDHS' leadership at every level recognizes that payment accuracy is one of the agency's top priorities and that increased accountability and awareness have resulted in a more efficient program for both the recipient and the taxpayer.*

---





# State of Ohio

## Department of Human Services

---

Dear Fellow Food Stamp Program Administrators:

Ohio has developed a coordinated, family-focused, community-based approach to service delivery that relies heavily on local governments and community leaders to address the holistic needs of children and families at any entry point to the human services systems. In our second phase of welfare reform, we stress not only the personal responsibility of the welfare recipient in becoming self-sufficient, but we also recognize our own responsibility in evaluating program outcomes to ensure effective use of funds and programs.

As government agencies, we must safeguard the public tax dollars with systems of integrity and accountability. We are obligated to the population we serve, as well as the public as a whole, to perform quality service delivery that is fiscally accountable.

Even though the food stamp benefit is only one component of the comprehensive assistance package we provide to needy families, it is an important part of the overall service delivery that we must provide on an accurate and timely basis.

Ohio has made payment accuracy in food stamps a commitment from Governor Taft and myself down to the eligibility workers on the front line in the local county departments of human services. Various initiatives have been implemented to target the client population, the worker population, and the general public to increase the awareness around this issue and strive for continual improvement.

---

*Ohio has made payment accuracy in food stamps a commitment from Governor Taft and myself down to the eligibility workers on the front line in the local county departments of human services.*

---

---

Ohio renewed our payment accuracy commitment early in 1996 preceding our first wave of welfare reform in October of that year. We have continued to target the food stamp error rate through our second wave of reform in October 1997. Ohio has decreased our food stamp error rate from Federal Fiscal Year 1995 to present day by approximately 6 percentage points.

Our success is attributed to the top-down management commitment and the facilitation of a partnership among the family, the community, and the State and local governments.

Sincerely,

Arnold R. Thompkins  
Director

---

# State of Texas

## Department of Human Services

---

Dear Fellow Food Stamp Program Administrators:

Thank you for this opportunity to advise you of Texas' progress in improving payment accuracy and its importance to the public assistance program in this State. Several years ago, Texas was sanction-liable in the Food Stamp Program. The State leadership decided that the high error rates Texas then experienced were unacceptable. Not only did the State incur sanctions, but millions of dollars were misspent and too many clients did not receive the benefits to which they were entitled.


During the past 4 years, Texas has achieved dramatic improvement in food stamp payment accuracy. The Texas payment error rate has been cut almost in half from the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 1994 level of 12.45 percent to the FFY 1997 level of 6.81 percent. Not only is the State's food stamp error rate below the national average of 9.88 percent, but also for the third year in a row, Texas achieved the lowest error rate among the Nation's six largest issuance States.

To achieve this significant reduction in payment error rates, our department's first step was to make payment accuracy a high priority at every level. As Commissioner, I have been proud to lead that effort. Our Quality Assurance Department, as well as our Regional Operations, Program, Support, and Service Delivery Staffs, have worked in cooperation to plan and implement the initiatives that lowered the payment error rate. And our Office of Inspector General continues to work to detect and deter food stamp fraud.

---

*...we have proven that the payment error rate can be controlled in even the largest issuance States through a combination of agency commitment at all levels, efficient and flexible planning, and a tough approach to fraud.*

---



---

In Texas, we have proven that the payment error rate can be controlled in even the largest issuance States through a combination of agency commitment at all levels, efficient and flexible planning, and a tough approach to fraud. We encourage other States to take on this important issue, so that we all do everything possible to ensure high public confidence in the program.

Sincerely,

Eric M. Bost  
Commissioner

---

# **The 1998 National Payment Accuracy Conference**

## ***Maintaining Service and Accountability***

---

On April 8 and 9 of 1998, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) held its Third National Food Stamp Payment Accuracy Conference. The conference brought together managers of the top 25 highest issuance counties and project areas, which account for more than 30 percent of the program's benefit distribution as well as error dollars. The theme for the 2-day conference was "Striking the Balance—Maintaining Service and Accountability." The conference focused on providing a forum to discuss payment accuracy issues, sharing "best practices" and techniques for reducing errors and improving program administration, and obtaining a strong commitment to payment accuracy at the highest levels of State Government. The momentum initiated by the 1994 and 1996 National Payment Accuracy Conferences heightened as the meeting was praised by participants for being a good source of information for identifying successful improvement strategies. Thoughts on the conference from just a few of the participants follow.

---

# Reflections on the 1998 National Payment Accuracy Conference

---

*“This conference reminded States of the importance of payment accuracy during a time of constant change in human service programs. The capacity to learn from the experiences and successes of colleagues from across the Nation highlighted the need for continual communication. It was encouraging that some States with previously high error rates were able to reduce errors to nonsanctioned levels.*

*“As a result of information shared at this conference, Connecticut has moved to develop the concept of ‘Corrective Action Specialists’ in every region to review food stamp case records. These specialists review records to assist staff in identifying trends, to provide on-site technical assistance, and to work on agency or regional corrective action initiatives.*

*“Overall, the conference was productive in the ideas and concepts conveyed by the States in the workshops, as well as the direction provided by FNS regional and national staffs.”*

**Valerie R. Marino, Deputy Commissioner  
Department of Social Services  
State of Connecticut**



---

*“What I remember most about the conference is the keynote speaker. He was both hilarious and inspirational. He provided each table with a few sheets of newspaper, a pair of scissors, and scotch tape. He instructed each table to choose a model and to dress the model using the materials he provided. We had 3 minutes to finish the task. The results were amazing. Each table produced a well-dressed model, clothed in The Washington Post!! He proved that if a diverse group of people are given a task and the tools to work with, they can effectively accomplish their mission.”*

**Sharon Cooper-DeLoatch, Chief  
Bureau of Management Systems  
Department of Human Services  
District of Columbia**



---

*“The ‘Fostering Commitment Panel’ presented by Indiana, Texas, Arizona, and Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania, helped us set the tone for renewed commitment when we returned to Nevada. It helped us to refocus and to recognize that goals must be visible; we must celebrate our successes, and we must hold everyone accountable for quality work. We implemented several changes as a result of the tips we learned including biweekly, statewide quality control conference calls to discuss errors, a poster campaign to help make our goals more visible, and staff recognition programs including awards and inexpensive gifts when possible (mugs, portfolios, pens, and pins).*”

*“We learned a great deal from the successes our friends experienced in Arkansas, Arizona, and Indiana and, through State exchange funds, visited them for more indepth reviews.*

*“Finally, we learned one very important thing from the special session speaker, Mr. Bob Basso. You need attitude before skills can help, and you can increase accountability when you increase self-esteem. We took this to heart and invited Mr. Basso to speak to many of our front-line managers and supervisors....”*

**Michael Willden, Deputy Administrator  
Program and Field Operations  
Department of Human Resources  
Nevada State Welfare Division**





---

*“The 1998 National Payment Accuracy Conference provided a forum for Missouri to recharge its passion for quality customer services through the Food Stamp Program in Missouri. Missouri staff used this opportunity to connect with promising practices in other States and large metropolitan areas. The conference created an environment that reinforced Missouri’s commitment and enthusiasm for creating a team where responsibility is shared with the food stamp household for payment accuracy, taking the emphasis from the back room of the agency to the front room.”*

**Carmen Schulze, Director  
Division of Family Services  
State of Missouri**



---

# Food and Nutrition Service Conferences

---

---

## ■ Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference

July 19-21, 1999, Hershey, Pennsylvania: Mid-Atlantic Payment Accuracy Team annual payment accuracy conference.

---

## ■ Midwest Regional Conference

June 24-25, 1999, Chicago, Illinois: BIG TEN reducing client error workshop. (Cosponsored by the State of Michigan.)

August 4-6, 1999, Chicago, Illinois: BIG TEN annual payment accuracy conference. Members of the BIG TEN include those counties in the region that issue \$10 million or more dollars of food stamps annually. (Cosponsored by the State of Illinois.)

---

## ■ Southeast Regional Conference

May 18-20, 1999, Mobile, Alabama: Six-Million-Dollar Club annual payment accuracy conference. Members of the Six-Million-Dollar Club include those counties in the region that issue \$6 million or more dollars of food stamps annually.

---

## ■ Southwest Regional Conference

August 24-26, 1999, Dallas, Texas: Annual payment accuracy conference.

---

## ■ Big Six Conference

June 16-18, 1999, New York City: Member States now include California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Texas as the top issuance States in the Nation.

---

# Recipe for Success

## Payment Accuracy Cookies

1 tbs of vanilla extract - **extract** all the information you can with the right questions  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of shortening - **shorten** the certification periods  
A dash of salt - **retain** records (not water)  
3 cups of flour - **sift** out the ineligible  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of walnuts - **crack** down on fraud  
2 cups of chocolate chips - **chip** away at that error rate  
 $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of water - **soak** up all the error-reduction strategies that you can  
 $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups of sugar - **dissolve** ineffective strategies  
  
Do not bake until all ingredients are **checked twice**.  
  
Do not cool for longer than **30 days**.

All our bakers are **trained regularly** and are aware of the latest cookie baking practices. A 1-800 number was established to **report any changes** people have experienced since they last consumed the cookies.

The ingredient list for these cookies was **matched** against the list of each of your known allergies. Unfortunately, the bakers did not act on these hits. If you have any allergies, eat at your own risk.

The shops where these cookies are sold are **open longer hours** on certain days of the week to allow the working person to come in and discuss their continuing need for these cookies and to talk about their current circumstances. This is not intended to replace their regular meeting with the Jenny Craig© consultants.

These cookies have been stored for the required 3 years, and we are now allowed to purge them.

By Katie Blanchette and Patti Connolly  
Northeast Regional Office



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14<sup>th</sup> & Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410, or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.